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ABSTRACT

The Rhode Island Commissioner of Education was authorized to appoint and work with a State Standards Council to develop recommendations on the establishment of measurable statewide educational achievement standards at two levels: basic skills and minimum competency. The purpose of setting standards and measuring achievement is to define minimally acceptable performance in those skills that are generally seen as essential by the community at large, and to track the progress of the educational system towards insuring that all students reach an acceptable level. Two lists of objectives, basic skills and minimum competency, were developed by the council. Both include reading, language arts, mathematics, and cultural arts. Basic skills testing should be in grade 4 and grade 6. Minimum competency testing should be in grade 8 and grade 10. A random sample of students should be tested, plus students nominated by local educators or parents as possibly needing extra educational assistance. Norm-referenced tests are adequate for the basic skills testing; tests are being developed for the minimum competency testing. Standards of performance have not yet been set, but should be based on empirical data currently being collected. The state should assist school districts in providing assistance to those students having the greatest difficulty. (BW)

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COMMISSIONER'S REPORT

TO THE

BOARD OF REGENTS

ON THE

ESTABLISHMENT OF STATEWIDE EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT STANDARDS

IN

BASIC SKILLS AND MINIMUM COMPETENCIES

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MAY 1979

TM 800 710

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BACKGROUND

ADOPTION OF POLICY

In May 1978, at the recommendation of the Commissioner, the Board of Regents adopted a policy that declared the Board's intent to establish and monitor statewide standards of educational achievement at three levels:

1. Basic Skills Standards -- measured by testing all students during elementary years.

2. Minimum Competency Standards -- measured by testing nearly all students in selected life skills during early and late secondary years.

3. Standards of Excellence -- measured by extensive assessment of advanced life skills, scholastic and cultural achievement for students aspiring to attain recognition by the Regents for special distinction along a variety of dimensions.

At the same time the Board authorized the Commissioner to form a broadly representative State Standards Council to develop such standards. The Commissioner would then transmit the resulting recommendations to the Regents together with his own analysis and recommendations.*

The Commissioner did subsequently form a State Standards Council,† and that group has now reported a number of recommendations to him. The Commissioner has reviewed those recommendations and through this report is transmitting them to the Board together with his own analysis and recommendations.

SCOPE OF THE REPORT

This report contains the Commissioner's recommendations thus far on the establishment of measurable statewide educational achievement standards.

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* For the complete text of the policy statement, see Appendix A.

† For a list of the Council members, see Appendix B.

The two levels addressed are those of basic skills and minimum competency. The main questions addressed are the following:

1. Why test in the first place?
2. What skills should be tested?
3. When should the testing take place?
4. Who should be tested?
5. How should the skills be measured?
6. How well should students be expected to perform?

It should be noted that the last question--the answer to which will determine the actual standards to be established--is not answered completely. The reason for this is the conviction of Department staff that this question can best be answered only with the help of extensive data that are not now available but that could be produced during the coming moratorium year in time to make decisions for the next round of statewide assessment. This report does include specific recommendations concerning the types of data that should be gathered.

Though, strictly speaking, it goes beyond the scope of the policy that is the basis for this report, there is one further question that is touched upon because of the Commissioner's belief that it would be irresponsible merely to identify failures without taking positive steps to correct them:

7. Who should do what to improve performance when tests show grave deficiencies?

Finally, it is important to point out that the Commissioner shares the fears of those who warn that minimum standards have a way of becoming the maximum. It was precisely to prevent standard-setting from leading to programmed mediocrity that the Commissioner recommended, and the Board

approved, the concept of establishing standards of excellence as well as minimum standards. This level is not addressed in the present report because it was agreed that the setting of minimum standards would take precedence. Together with generating the new data needed to determine the exact point of acceptable performance in basic skills and minimum competency, however, work on this level is the next major order of business in implementing the policy on statewide educational achievement standards.

WHY TEST IN THE FIRST PLACE?

No single testing program, administered from one particular level in the educational system, can accomplish all of the purposes that tests are thought to be capable of serving. It is important, therefore, to be clear about the purposes that are intended in establishing measurable statewide educational achievement standards. Otherwise it is inevitable that some unrealistic--and perhaps even conflicting -- expectations will arise.

The overriding purpose of setting standards and measuring achievement in basic skills and minimum competency is to define minimally acceptable performance in those skills that are generally seen as essential by the community at large, and then to track the progress of the educational system towards the goal of insuring that all students reach at least the level specified as acceptable. When the test results are in, they should yield a clear picture of the numbers of students across the state who have run into major problems in acquiring a modicum of proficiency in essential skills. The results should also give state level decision-makers some strong clues as to the specific areas of instruction where it would be most profitable for the Board of Regents to establish priorities for the allocation of resources and for the Department of Education to initiate or strengthen technical assistance to local communities. In addition to using the results in similar ways within their own jurisdictions, local educators could use them for the extremely important purpose of identifying individual students who are suffering from grave deficiencies in the mastery of essential skills.

In a word, then, the basic reason for setting minimum standards and measuring performance against them is to identify and eliminate gross educational failures. For most students and for most of the components of the instructional program, therefore, the minimum standards should prove to be

largely irrelevant. They will simply be beyond that point. How far beyond that point they are (with respect to the skills tested) can also be determined, however, as a secondary purpose of the testing program by using nationally standardized measures. This will continue to give the Regents and the general public information similar to that which they have been receiving for some years concerning the achievement of Rhode Island students relative to that of students across the nation as a whole.

A testing program that serves these purposes will be no small accomplishment. Yet it is well to point out that there are certain functions that some people assume will be carried out that will not apply, even insofar as the poorly performing students are concerned. The most important point to note here is that statewide testing will not provide educators or parents with diagnostic information on individual youngsters. A statewide test covering a fairly broad range of skills within a very limited testing time must be seen as a somewhat rough screening device. It simply cannot be expected to yield information that is sufficiently detailed to result in a solid diagnosis of a student's specific problems. Once a student has been identified as not meeting minimum standards, of course, diagnostic procedures could and should be initiated at the local level if they have not been undertaken already. (Such procedures will often include information beyond test results that is supplied by the student's teachers, parents, guidance personnel and other sources.)

There are other uses that might also be assumed to flow automatically from statewide testing that are likewise not appropriate for the type of tests that standard-setting will introduce. These uses include decisions concerning the promotion and graduation of individual students and evaluations of the professional competence of individual teachers or administrators--or groups

of professionals, for that matter. The quantity and sophistication of data that are possible in a statewide testing program at this time are far less than what would be required to make accurate and fair judgments of those kinds.

WHAT SKILLS SHOULD BE TESTED?

Deciding what skills should be tested is a concrete way of deciding what goals should be pursued. Composing a statement of educational philosophy, or compiling a list of educational goals and objectives, is often a demanding and even a harrowing activity because of the necessity of making value choices. But deciding what goals should be represented in a statewide testing program is tougher still because testing time is much more limited than most people's lists of important and desirable learning outcomes. This means that a relatively few highly valued skills must be selected from among many. Of all the educational decision-making tasks that require heavy participation from representatives of the various segments of the statewide community, this one heads the list. And in fact it was this very task on which the State Standards Council concentrated its greatest attention, thrashing out the value considerations at length and eventually coming to a consensus.

Before presenting the two lists of skills agreed to by the Council (one for basic skills and one for minimum competency), it is important to note that the recommended target skills included some that the Council realized could not be included in statewide tests within the foreseeable future. Nevertheless the Council believed that they should be included in the list as a statement of their continuing importance and value to society. The Council left it to the Commissioner and Regents to determine exactly which specific skills could not be measured in a reasonably cost-effective way in the near future. In the lists that follow, those that the Commissioner believes fall into that category are footnoted.

BASIC SKILLS

In developing its definition of basic skills, the Council drew heavily on a list that had been prepared by the highly regarded Center for the Study of Evaluation, located at the University of California at Los Angeles. CSE staff constructed their classification scheme after reviewing statements of philosophy, goals and objectives from many state and local educational agencies across the country. Thus the Council, with some minor revisions in language, was able to concentrate its energies on the task of choosing from among already defined learning outcomes rather than having to formulate its own list from scratch. After lengthy deliberations, the Council selected twenty-three (23) skills from a list that contained 109 skills.

Following the recommendation of the State Standards Council, the Commissioner recommends adoption of the target skills listed below as the official definition of basic skills in Rhode Island.

READING

1. Listening

   Listens actively and attentively. Grasps the content, intent and mood conveyed by a speaker. Shows understanding of the meanings of spoken words. Visualizes characters and events while listening. Follows the train of thoughts of a speech and the plot of a play, story, or movie. Listens selectively with a given purpose in mind. Follows oral directions.*

2. Speaking

   Participates in discussions, effectively organizing own thoughts and reactions in responding to others. Summarizes information and relates stories and experiences effectively. Speaks grammatically, fluently, and with good pronunciation.*

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* Because of the great difficulty of measuring this outcome accurately in a cost-effective manner, it may not be included in statewide testing in the near future. As test development efforts proceed and testing technology improves, however, this outcome may be covered in future assessments.

3. Word Attack Skills

Identifies the different sounds in words using phonetic skills or structural clues. Knows relationships between sounds and their written forms. Identifies letters, syllables, roots, prefixes, and suffixes.

4. Recognition of Word Meanings

Shows understanding of the meanings of written words by identifying definitions, similar words, illustrations, synonyms, or antonyms. Knows different meanings that the same word may communicate.

5. Reading Comprehension

Understands material read. Understands the meaning of words from context. Follows written directions. Identifies topic sentences, main ideas, and intent of the author, and finds supporting details and illustrations in the text. Keeps track of the times and the places in which events occur as well as other relationships. (Reads at a rate appropriate to the material and purpose.)

6. Oral Reading

Reads aloud at a suitable pace, with correct pronunciation and appropriate vocal expression. Communicates the mood and intent of the author.*

LANGUAGE ARTS

1. Spelling

Knows the spelling of frequently used words. Applies spelling rules, phonetic skills, and previous vocabulary knowledge to the spelling of new words and the detection of spelling errors.

2. Punctuation and Capitalization

Knows and uses correct punctuation, abbreviation, and capitalization.

3. Grammatical Skills in Writing

Knows and uses rules of usage, agreement, and case appropriate for 4th graders. Recognizes, revises, and constructs complete, grammatical sentences. Recognizes and illustrates grammatical transformations. Identifies subjects, predicates, parts of speech, modals, articles, verb forms, tenses, participles, and adverb, adjective, and noun phrases and clauses.

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* Because of the great difficulty of measuring this outcome accurately in a cost-effective manner, it may not be included in statewide testing in the near future. As test development efforts proceed and testing technology improves, however, this outcome may be covered in future assessments.

4. Penmanship

Prints or writes neatly and legibly. Writes with ease and accuracy.*

5. Expression in Writing

Finds various ways appropriate for 4th graders to express the same thought, and evaluates their effects on the reader. Produces writing that shows individuality in the content and expression. Revises written work by eliminating unnecessary wordiness, illustrating unsupported ideas, and correcting inconsistencies in style and sentence structure.*

MATHEMATICS

1. Knowledge of Numbers

Understands whole-numbers. Differentiates between numerals and numbers, odd and even numbers, prime and composite numbers. Identifies factors, multiples, and relative primes of a given number.

2. Knowledge of Numeral Systems and Number Principles

Reads, recites, and writes numerals. Understands place value and the rounding of numbers. Understands the commutative, associative, and distributive properties, inverse operations, properties of 0 and 1, negatives, and reciprocals. Finds and evaluates simple numerical rules based on observation.

3. Knowledge of Number Relationships

Understands number relationships, number sentences, variables, and formulas. Reads sentences using letters or frames and equality or inequality signs, and relates them to quantitative statements in English. Solves or graphs equations and inequalities. Tests relations for reflexivity, symmetry, and transitivity.

4. Solution of Word Problems

Finds or estimates solutions to word problems in mathematics, using knowledge of arithmetic and measurement. Expresses problems as computational problems.

5. Personal Use and Appreciation of Math

Independently applies math knowledge, skills, and strategies to such personal activities as comparison shopping, game participation, and hobbies.*

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6. Measurement Knowledge and Skills

Understands English and metric concepts of weight, length, and time. Uses instruments to measure distance, weight, and time. Estimates answers and their degree of precision. Understands metric and English units.

CULTURAL ARTS

1. Art

Shows awareness of the colors, forms, shapes and simple designs that can be found in objects and in the natural environment.*

2. Music

Recognizes music as a means of expression - specifically simple rhythms, melodies, tones and creative movement to music.*

3. Health and Safety

Has good eating, teeth care, hygiene, dress and posture habits, and gets enough rest, sleep and exercise. Knows traffic and safety rules and how to make the environment safer.*

4. Athletics

Shows ability to perform skills identified as appropriate for their age group by the President's Council on Physical Fitness.*

5. Creativity

Shows awareness of various strategies for problem solving and can look at things in different ways. Shows imagination, originality and inventiveness. Can find new uses for objects.*

6. Cultural Insights

Recognizes cultures that differ from his own. Recognizes the principal values of a given culture.†

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† Though it is expected that cost-effective means of measuring this skill can be located or devised, that may not happen in time for the skill to be represented in the next assessment.

MINIMUM COMPETENCY

As in the case of the basic skills, in defining the life skills that comprise minimum competency the State Standards Council again sought to avoid duplication of previous efforts. Rhode Island already had a set of 75 "performance indicators" calling for competence in such everyday tasks as unit pricing and analyzing advertisements, and test items had already been developed to measure these skills. The Council therefore started with these, selecting 36 from the list of 75 and then adding 20 additional skills that the Council felt also should be included in the definition of minimum competency. Some of the latter present the same kinds of measurement problems that were referred to earlier but were nevertheless included for the reason stated. Others are not so difficult to measure in and of themselves, though it may not be feasible to locate or develop measures in time for the next round of statewide assessment.

Following the recommendation of the State Standards Council, the Commissioner recommends adoption of the target skills listed below as the official definition of minimum competency in Rhode Island.

The Commissioner proposes to include as many as possible of the target skills identified under the headings of basic skills and minimum competency in statewide tests of educational achievement standards. Those skills that it is not now feasible to measure will become reflected in the tests as and when appropriate measures become available.

READING

1. Reading for the Main Idea

   Read an article of several pages and identify the main topic.

2. Reading to Get Details

   Read a brief descriptive passage and then supply specified details.†

3. Reading to Build Vocabulary

   Read a passage consisting mostly of frequently used words and from the context infer the meaning of an infrequently used word.†

4. Selecting the Best Way to Verify a Statement

   Select from several specified methods the one best suited to check the accuracy of a given statement.

5. Reading for an Understanding of Cultural Pluralism

   Read an explanation of cultural pluralism and identify situations which reflect the concept as stated.

6. Reading for an Understanding of the Principle of Equality

   Read an explanation of the principle that all human beings are fundamentally equal and identify intergroup or interpersonal behavior which does or does not violate that principle as stated.

7. Reading Newspapers Critically

   Read a piece from a newspaper and determine whether it consists purely of statements of fact or whether it also includes opinion.†

8. Reading to Scan

   Scan a table of contents, an index, and outline or a summary to obtain a specified piece of information.†

9. Library Reference Skills

   Read an explanation of the major uses of various library reference tools (e.g., encyclopedia, reader's guide, card catalog, newspaper index) and determine which would be most helpful in obtaining a specified piece of information.†

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† Though it is expected that cost-effective means of measuring this skill can be located or devised, that may not happen in time for the skill to be represented in the next assessment.

10. Reading Manufacturers' Warnings

Read a manufacturer's warning concerning dangers associated with the use of a given product and distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate uses.

11. Reading Directions for Assembling Objects or Running Machines

Read directions for assembling a household object or running a simple machine and demonstrate an understanding of the sequence of tasks involved.

12. Reading to Identify Stereotypes

Read an explanation of stereotyping and determine which judgments represent stereotyping.

13. Reading to Spot Misleading Ads

Read criteria for determining particularly misleading ads and identify such ads.

14. Reading for Directions to Vote

Read directions for voting and correctly complete a sample ballot used somewhere in the United States.

15. Reading to Identify Key Political Issues

Read a brief account of a political campaign and identify the key issue under consideration.

16. Reading to Learn About Balanced Diets

Examine a chart showing what constitutes a balanced diet and determine whether a described daily diet is well balanced.

17. Using a Map

Use a map to determine how to arrive at a specified location.

18. Reading to Understand Community Health Problems

Read an explanation of the basic causes of some community health problem and identify practices which contribute to the problem.

19. Learning First Aid Procedures

Examine a list of first aid rules and identify for a given situation appropriate first aid procedures.

20. Learning Home Safety Rules

Examine a list of home safety rules and identify situations which meet the criteria.

21. Evaluating Solutions to Environmental Problems

Examine several proposed solutions to an environmental problem and determine which would be best from an economic point of view and which would be best from a community health point of view.

22. Reading Literary Selections for Interpretation and Enjoyment

Choose the reading of literature as one significant leisure-time activity and integrate the meanings derived from the literature into one's own conceptual framework.*

LANGUAGE ARTS

1. Writing Resumes

Write a resume and complete a job application which would be acceptable in form to a review panel of personnel officers.

2. Explaining Personal Goals Clearly in Writing

Explain clearly and succinctly in writing some personal goal and the reasons for embracing it.

3. Communicating Personal Thoughts in One of Several Mediums of Expression

Communicate some personal thought or feeling on a given topic clearly and succinctly in one of the following forms: prose, poetry, drawing, musical composition, speech.

4. Listening for Indications of Prejudice

Listen to a statement and identify any of the content that suggests prejudice against a social, religious, racial or sex group.

5. Communicating Effectively on the Telephone

In a simulated situation, obtain information of a given type via telephone (e.g., bus schedule information, a certain fact from a reference librarian, the availability of help for a given problem from a public agency).†

6. Detecting Logical Errors

Examine two illogical statements which take different positions on the same issue and identify the error in each.

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7. Completing Job Applications

Complete in acceptable form an application for a position or job with a hiring organization.

8. Settling Arguments Logically

Listen to an argument and select from several statements the one that provides the information most likely to settle the argument logically.

9. Obtaining Information Efficiently

Listen to a question that is answerable with available information and orally propose a means of answering the question with a minimal expenditure of time.

10. Understanding the Functions of Government Agencies

Listen to a brief description of the functions of a particular government agency and identify those services that would appropriately be provided by that agency.

MATHEMATICS

1. Calculation of Personal Income

Compute the proper amount of a paycheck from information such as hourly wage and hours worked, commission rate and volume of sales, tips and payroll deductions.†

2. Buying Insurance

Compare the net costs and benefits of competing insurance policies within each of the various types (e.g., life insurance and property insurance).†

3. Using a Checking Account

Conduct transactions associated with using a checking account.

4. Completing an IRS Form

Complete a short form income tax return correctly, both state and federal.

5. Comparison Shopping for Housing

Calculate the average monthly housing cost for the rental of an apartment, ownership of a single home and participation in a condominium, given a listing of the total yearly expenses in various categories.

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† Though it is expected that cost-effective means of measuring this skill can be located or devised, that may not happen in time for the skill to be represented in the next assessment.

6. Calculating the Cost of Running an Automobile

   Calculate the total cost, partial costs, and the average per mile cost of running an automobile for one year, given a listing of yearly expenses in various categories.

7. Retail Sales

   a. Identify the most economical grocery item from a list using unit pricing.†

   b. Identify a legitimate sale item and/or discount item.†

   c. Check accuracy of sales slips, including taxes.†

8. Handling Money

   a. Calculate compound and simple interest, given the amount, the interest rate, and the time period.

   b. Shows basic understanding of stock market, bonds market, savings accounts, installment buying.†

CULTURAL ARTS

1. Art

   a. Examine some work of art and describe its structure or theme.

   b. Generate a list of personal criteria by which to judge a work of art and determine whether a given work meets those criteria.

   c. Read descriptions of various forms of art within at least two areas such as literature, music, film, dance, or theatre, and match given works to their forms.

2. Music

   a. Enjoy music activities. Respond emotionally to the rhythm and mood of music and to dance performances. Engage in music activities during leisure time. Find music and dance satisfying as means of self-expression.*

   b. Read descriptions of various forms of art within at least two areas such as literature, music, film, dance, or theatre and match given works to their forms.

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† Though it is expected that cost-effective means of measuring this skill can be located or devised, that may not happen in time for the skill to be represented in the next assessment.

3. Health and Safety

   a. Examine a chart showing what constitutes a balanced diet and determine whether the described daily diet is well balanced.†

   b. Know a variety of foods and their nutritional content, why food needs vary, and how food spoilage is prevented. Understand the need for quiet, proper lighting and heating, clean air and water, body cleanliness and good posture. Know the benefits of exercise and play. Understand how emotional factors relate to health.†

   c. Have a basic understanding of sex differences, the physical and psychological changes of adolescence, menstruation, masturbation, intercourse, conception, prenatal development, birth, and infant care. Understand sexual expression, the custom of dating and the responsibilities of sex and marriage.†

   d. Understand the different family life patterns, both past and present. Understand the implications for the family of both birth, and adoption, death, divorce, and remarriage, loss of jobs, and moving.†

4. Cultural Insights

   a. Have a clear sense of right and wrong, and strive to apply it in daily life. Justify own personal code of ethics. Be sensitive to ethical inconsistencies.*

   b. Value the cultural variety, racial diversity, and alternative life styles that enrich U.S. society. Recognize the inadequacy of the concept of race, and discount all social stereotypes in forming opinions about others. Be aware of national, racial and religious bias in what people say and do. Be proud of contributions made by other groups.*

5. Athletics

   Show ability to perform skills identified as appropriate for their age group by the President's Council on Physical Fitness.*

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† Though it is expected that cost-effective means of measuring this skill can be located or devised, that may not happen in time for the skill to be represented in the next assessment.

WHEN SHOULD THE TESTING TAKE PLACE?

The State Standards Council devoted considerable attention to determining at which grades it would be most appropriate to measure attainment of the basic skills and minimum competency. Despite some misgivings as to whether adequate funds would be available in future years to carry out testing at all the levels it recommended, the Council nevertheless felt an obligation to recommend testing at each of the grades where it seemed necessary to obtain a reading on students' performance. If testing is targeted carefully to provide just the right information to just the right decision-makers for just the right purposes (as the section "Who Should Be Tested" will suggest), it may well turn out to be economically feasible to test at all of the grades the Council recommends.

BASIC SKILLS

Of special concern to the State Standards Council was the question at which grade the state should first administer measures keyed to the basic skills standards. On the one hand, it should be early enough to insure that any serious problems have not developed to the point where they are virtually intractable. On the other hand, it should not be so early as to result in prematurely labeling as "slow" or "dull" certain students whose maturational rate happens to be different from the majority--the proverbial late bloomers, for example. As the most appropriate grade for initial testing, the Council recommended the fourth grade. The Council also proposed that follow-up testing be carried out at the sixth grade. For both grades the Council recommended that the testing be done during the month of April so that most of the school year's instruction would have taken place by the time the test is administered. The Commissioner supports these recommendations.

MINIMUM COMPETENCY

For reasons similar to those that guided the thinking of the Council with respect to basic skills measurement, the Council recommended testing for minimum competency first at grade eight and then as a follow-up at grade ten. The Commissioner endorses these recommendations.

The Council did not specify the time of year in its recommendations concerning minimum competency, but the Commissioner proposes to have that testing done as close to the beginning of the year as is feasible so that there will be as much time as possible to work with students who manifest severe deficiencies in the life skills since many of these very youngsters will be very close to the end of their formal education.

WHO SHOULD BE TESTED?

In the section of this report that deals with the purposes of setting minimum standards and measuring performance against them, it is suggested that the primary purpose is to provide state and local decision-makers with accurate information concerning how many students and which students are performing so poorly in certain skills as not to meet what the community at large views as a barely acceptable level of proficiency. Secondarily, it was pointed out, it is possible at the same time to obtain the type of data that is required for conventional comparisons of Rhode Island students with those of the country as a whole.

In addition to the above, assume that it is educational personnel at the local level--not at the state level--who have the pressing need to know which students are not performing up to standard and who will bear the major responsibility for doing something to help those who are not. Assume further that most teachers and principals already know which of their students are clearly performing above minimum standards and which are clearly performing below standards.

It makes sense to think of administering the statewide standards tests only to the following students:

1. a relatively small simple random sample from the state as a whole;*
2. any students designated to take the test by local authorities, either:
   a. to supplement local test data on individual students, especially borderline students for whom additional

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* This would probably amount to no more than a thousand students at a given grade level (as opposed to several thousand students for each grade tested using current sampling procedures).

information would be helpful to clarify or confirm local test results; or

b. to compare local achievement with statewide achievement by testing a representative sample of local students.

But some parents might fear that their children are having major problems that are going unnoticed by the local school system. To provide them with a back-up system to insure that serious deficiencies do not go unrecognized, parents could be allowed to petition to have their child included in the testing. Parents who do petition for such testing could be required to acknowledge in writing that they have a genuine question as to whether their child meets minimum standards, that they understand that the test results will not yield a detailed profile of the student's strengths and weaknesses or provide a percentile rank, and so forth.

The major appeal of a system developed along these lines is that every piece of information that is produced will be used. In fact, no student will be tested in the first place unless someone with responsibility for his/her education has requested it. State authorities will get the statewide summary information they need for policy-making purposes without being burdened with an overload of detailed information that is of questionable or marginal value to them. Local educators will get information only on the performance of those students they want to know more about than they already do. And the only parents who are given test results for their children are those who have asked for the information. If there is little demand for the tests from local school personnel and parents, then the amount of disruption of the regular instructional program for state testing purposes will be truly minimal.*

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* An efficient state sample of students could be constructed that would consist of no more than a handful of students in any given school, tests being administered in a controlled and uniform manner with the assistance of educational television or video or audio cassettes.

On the other hand, should the numbers of students that are being tested grow to the point where the testing intrudes substantially into regular instructional time, that would be happening only as a direct result of local demand from those who are closest to the students.

This system, then, represents a compromise between a pure sampling model and a pure census testing model.* Yet it is elastic enough to draw close to either extreme in a particularly appropriate and defensible way--that is, simply by being responsive to the level of demand that exists outside the state education agency.

Since this system is a new one, there are a number of mechanical details that have to be worked out before it is implemented in a large-scale testing program. Even more important, it should be put to a fair test first, not only to ascertain whether it can deliver in practice what it promises in theory, but also to get at least a rough estimate of the level of demand that the system is likely to encounter on a statewide basis. The Commissioner therefore proposes to initiate the system outlined above on a trial basis to the extent feasible in one or more judiciously selected school districts in the state during the statewide assessment moratorium year (1979-80).

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* The State Standards Council recommended census testing for basic skills and sample testing for minimum competency. The former decision, however, was hotly debated within the Council, and Council members representing the following organizations asked to be recorded as being strongly opposed to this recommendation: NEA Rhode Island; Rhode Island Federation of Teachers; Secondary School Principals Association.

HOW SHOULD THE SKILLS BE MEASURED?

Paper-and-pencil tests are by no means the only legitimate way in which to measure the acquisition of skills. For a statewide test, however, it is the most cost-effective way to do so at present. Even within the realm of conventional achievement measures, however, finding the right instrument to match a given set of target skills is seldom a simple, straightforward matter. When the test or tests selected are to be used to set standards and measure performance against them, the decision is a particularly serious one.

BASIC SKILLS

In considering the question of test selection, the State Standards Council suggested that the Department enlist the help of tests and measurement experts from the state institutions of higher education. The Department did so, laying out a number of tasks (to be completed within tight time constraints) and suggesting some criteria for the experts to consider using together with any they might wish to add. Staff from the Curriculum Research and Development Center at URI, with assistance from staff at the Center for Evaluation and Research at RIC, undertook the assignment and prepared a report, the summary and recommendations from which follow and are endorsed by the Commissioner:

> In examining five tests currently used in the State of Rhode Island it was found that the areas of language arts, reading, and mathematics could be assessed in a broad, global fashion using norm-referenced tests. The area of cultural arts did not lend itself to assessment with these types of tests and no suitable alternatives were identified in the short time available for the review. In addition, it is the opinion of the author of this report that norm-referenced tests such as the ITBS (Iowa Tests of Basic Skills), the CTBS (Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills), the MAT (Metropolitan Achievement Test), the CAT (California Achievement Test), or the SAT (Stanford Achievement Test) do not lend themselves to effectively measuring basic skills such as speaking, listening, and composition. For areas such as these it is recommended that alternative, criterion-referenced measures based on school instructional programs be developed.

It may be possible and is certainly desirable to ultimately utilize a combination of norm-referenced tests -- to measure global aspects of the basic skills -- and criterion-referenced tests which are developed with local school input in order to most effectively measure student attainment in the basic skills identified as important by the State Standards Council.

If a norm-referenced testing approach is adopted, especially in the subskill areas delineated above, the test, or combination of tests, adopted should provide technically sound data which can be related to previous assessments carried out in the state. The 1971 edition of the ITBS, which has been extensively used for assessment in the past, has been eclipsed by the 1978 edition for which very little evaluative data is yet available. Every effort should be made to carefully examine the 1978 ITBS, the 1978 MAT, and the 1977 CAT for use in future assessments. If the decision is taken to use norm-referenced tests in order to maintain a global measure of the basic skills and to continue assessment in a manner that is capable of maintaining meaningful comparisons to past levels of performance, the adoption of the most recent editions of the ITBS would seem logical. However, the use of recently developed data conversion and aggregation procedures such as those designated under the RMC Title I evaluation models would potentially allow the adoption of other tests such as the 1978 MAT and the like.

In summary, the 1978 editions of the ITBS and the MAT should be considered if the decision is taken to use a norm-referenced approach to assessing the basic skills. More data should be obtained on these instruments in order to examine the extent to which they will produce data which is not only relevant to the basic skills identified but which will offer accurate comparisons with results in previous years of assessment in Rhode Island. Test coordinators from local school departments should be offered the opportunity to share their experience and expertise in reviewing the latest editions of the ITBS, the MAT, and the CAT and to render their judgment as to the best compromise test to be used in this assessment effort. Again, it should be emphasized that no single test will meet all the needs expressed in the report of the State Standards Council. Norm-referenced tests do not provide the best assessment information on many of the skills identified. This can only be done with other kinds of instruments which are geared to the actual instructional programs which exist in the school around the state.

MINIMUM COMPETENCY

As part of the Master Plan for Evaluation, the Board of Regents in 1975 adopted a set of 75 "performance indicators" of success in mastering life skills. Since then, objective-referenced test items measuring those indicators have been developed and field-tested, and have begun to be incorporated into

the Statewide Assessment Program. It was substantially the same list of 75 performance indicators that the State Standards Council started with when it approached the task of defining minimum competency, and in fact most of the skills on the Council's recommendation list were taken from those indicators, for which measures are already available. As noted earlier, for some of the minimum competency skills identified by the Council carefully evaluated measures are not presently at hand, but these could be added in the future. The Commissioner therefore proposes to begin measuring those skills for which the Department now has adequate test items and to add items for the other skills in future years.

HOW WELL SHOULD STUDENTS BE EXPECTED TO PERFORM?

A standard is not a vague goal. It is not even a specific objective. A standard goes further in that it makes explicit not only what has to be learned but also exactly how well it ought to be learned. A minimum standard of educational achievement will answer the question: Precisely what test score (or configuration of test scores) will be taken as reasonable evidence that a student has reached at least a barely acceptable level of performance in the skills that are covered?

Anyone who approaches the task of setting minimum standards should be extremely clear on one point: There is no way of setting standards that is not at bottom an exercise in human judgment. There is no escaping the arbitrariness of the task. There is no test available for which a "passing" score can be taken as solid proof that someone who tests above that score can be assumed to be a competent person while someone who tests below that score can be assumed to be incompetent. This does not mean that minimum standards should not be set. It does mean that they should be set with the help of a great deal of relevant data--as well as with a great deal of humility.

The Commissioner therefore proposes that during the general moratorium on testing certain critical information be gathered that will enable the Regents to draw the line separating competence from incompetence with as much confidence as one can reasonably have in matters of this sort. Both for basic skills and for minimum competency, the following information should be gathered by administering the appropriate tests in a school district that is carefully selected for the extent to which it is representative of Rhode Island as a whole:

1. an estimate of the average score that a representative sample of students can be expected to achieve;

2. an estimate of the distribution of scores that can be expected from a representative sample;
3. the average score and the range of scores registered by all students who have been judged "borderline" by their teachers in the skills specified--this being the most important reference group to have data on.

With specific reference to minimum competency, there is one further type of information that a special advance task force of non-Department people who worked on this project during the early stages suggested as being both relevant and eminently fair. The suggestion was that no matter what the "cutting score" for minimum competency might turn out to be, it should in no event be set any higher than the lowest score attained by any member of the task force itself, the State Standards Council (to which the task force was submitting this recommendation) and the Board of Regents, which will have the responsibility for actually setting the standards. (When the Commissioner's Management Team learned of this proposal, the group volunteered to add itself to the list.) The test should be completed by all of these groups on an anonymous basis. The rationale, of course, is that every member of these groups should automatically be considered to have substantially exceeded the point of minimum competency by anyone's definition, and that any student who can match the performance of any one of them patently deserves also to be automatically considered to have exceeded minimum competency.

WHO SHOULD DO WHAT TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE WHEN TESTS SHOW GRAVE DEFICIENCIES?

As the Regents' policy statement on statewide educational achievement standards declares, specifying standards is an indispensable step in focusing the energies of the state's educational community and in checking the results of publicly supported programs. Clearly, however, it is not the only step required to lift achievement levels. It is one thing to identify failures; it is another thing to eliminate them or drastically reduce their incidence. No testing program in and of itself can improve educational performance. Once the magnitude of the problem has been determined and the students who are having the greatest difficulty have been identified, corrective actions will have to be taken. This is neither the time not the place to unfold a plan for solving the problems that a statewide standards test is likely to uncover. Nevertheless, it is an appropriate point to reassert the principle that students who find themselves in big trouble need much more than an official certification of failure.

As a practical matter, of course, virtually all the help that a poorly performing student will get must come from the local school system. But there are a number of ways in which state authorities can influence the nature and the intensity of the remedial treatment to which the failing student is exposed. Let it suffice for now to say that the possible modes of state leadership cover a wide range, beginning at one end of the spectrum with merely exhorting LEAs to step up their efforts to help failing students, and finishing at the other end of the spectrum with mandating and monitoring the introduction of specific interventions that have been prescribed at the state level. In between these extremes fall a variety of other possibilities, including such measures as targeting all existing

discretionary funds to efforts that zero in on improving instruction in skill areas where statewide performance is weakest; generating additional state and federal dollars to cover the "excess costs" of remediation; stepping up efforts to implement the planning guidelines known as "Title I Reading Standards" at the same time that those guidelines are being continually refined and sharpened; aggressively disseminating information on practices that have already demonstrated high success rates either in Rhode Island or elsewhere; and beefing up research efforts to strengthen the now meager knowledge base as to what works best at improving educational performance.

Much of the direction for deciding how to cut down on the numbers of students whose performance does not meet minimum standards should come from the new priority project on basic skills. But it is important not to end this report on standards and tests without acknowledging that a test does not an educational program make.

APPENDIX A

POLICY ON STATE EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT STANDARDS

In accordance with the statutory powers and duties assigned to the Board of Regents in Chapter 16-49 of the General Laws, and in furtherance of the Master Plan for Evaluation already adopted by the Regents in 1975, the Board hereby expresses its determination to establish, maintain and monitor instructional standards that will substantially lift the level of educational achievement in the State of Rhode Island.

The Board strongly believes that specifying desirable standards of achievement -- together with adequate measurement of performance against such standards -- is an indispensable step in focusing the energies of the state's educational community and in checking the results of publicly supported programs. The Board therefore declares its intent to establish such standards, as well as corresponding measures of progress, for three different levels of educational achievement.

1. Basic Skills Standards -- measured by testing all students during elementary years

2. Minimum Competency Standards -- measured by testing nearly all students in selected life skills during early and late secondary years

3. Standards of Excellence -- measured by extensive assessment of advanced life skills, scholastic and cultural achievement for students aspiring to attain recognition by the Regents for special distinction along a variety of dimensions

Further, the Board directs the Commissioner to form a broadly representative State Standards Council (or separate councils if more practical) to recommend standards at all three levels identified above. After receiving and reviewing such recommendations, the Commissioner shall transmit them to the Regents together with his own analysis and recommendations.

Adopted by the
Board of Regents
May 11, 1978

APPENDIX B

MEMBERS OF STATE STANDARDS COUNCIL*

Member	Organization/Address
Mrs. Grace Bagdasarian President	R.I. Congress of Parents and Teachers 179 Walnut Street East Providence, RI 02914
Mr. William Berger Vice-President	R.I. Federation of Teachers, AFT 104 Superior Street Warwick, RI
Amelia Casale	NEA Rhode Island c/o Arlington School 155 Princess Avenue Cranston, RI 02920
Mr. Robert C. Courtemanche[1] Superintendent of Schools	R.I. Association of School Superintendents c/o Central Falls School Department 21 Hedley Avenue Central Falls, RI 02863
Mrs. Nancy Husted-Jensen Co-Chairperson	R.I. Special Education Advisory Committee Old Boston Nect Road, P.O. Box 456 Narragansett, RI 02882
Ms. Maria Ialongo Vocational Student Winner, State Job Interview Contest	1555 Cranston Street Cranston, RI 02920
Mr. William R. Jones Manager, Industrial Relations	Raytheon Corporation Portsmouth, RI 02871
Mr. Nicholas J. Mastors[2]	105 Scrabbletown Road North Kingstown, RI 02852
Mary McCaffrey	Council of Presidents of Explorer Posts 115 Twin Oak Drive Warwick, RI 02889
Mrs. Tina Mercurio	270 Woodward Road Providence, RI

* The principal method used to select members for the Council was for the Commissioner to invite the heads of major statewide education interest groups to join the Council. In some instances the person heading an organization designated a substitute to represent the group. In addition, three members were asked to serve as a result of suggestions made by individual Regents.

[1] Resigned as of March.
[2] Passed away in December.

Mr. Franklin Peters President	Elementary School Principals' Association c/o Northern Lincoln Elementary School New River Road Manville, RI 02838
Mr. Freeman M. Soares President	R.I. Parents' Association Concerned for Excellence in Children's Education 16 Emmett Street Providence, RI 02903
Mr. Aaron Slom President	R.I. Association of School Committees 177 Airport Road Warwick, RI 02889
Mr. Thomas Sweeney President	Secondary School Principals' Association c/o Portsmouth High School Education Lane Portsmouth, RI 02871
Dr. Nelson Vieira[3] Chairman	Steering Committee for Non-English-Speaking Youth and Adults Center for Brazilian and Portuguese Studies Brown University 15 Manning Street Providence, RI 02906

[3] Resigned as of November.